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AUTHOR Boylan, Colin; Bittar, Lex
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ABSTRACT

The aim of school councils in New South Wales (Australia) is to ensure that the whole community is involved in all important decisions made by the school. The impetus for school councils began in 1990, and in 1995 the Department of School Education placed their formation on its priority agenda in response to their slow rate of establishment. Two possible scenarios for their functioning have been suggested. In the compliance orientation, school councils are regarded as a political policy fad and their creation is seen as an end in itself. In the capacity-building orientation, school councils become the means for creating a stronger partnership between parents, teachers, and the community to improve the quality of education. A study examined 96 school council members' perceptions of the functioning of school councils in 18 small, rural schools in the Riverina region of New South Wales. Council members expressed displeasure over councils being taken over by outside special interest groups. Respondents were interested in developing many policies but were less certain they should be involved in curriculum development. Most council members saw their advisory roles as being involved with school administration and distributing decision-making power among the community. Members criticized cutbacks in funding to education. In many schools the compliance orientation seemed to be the modus operandi, but some promising signs were expressed by individual members who were working toward the capacity-building orientation. (TD)

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Dr. Colin Boylan
and
Mr Lex Bittar
Charles Sturt University

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School Councils in New South Wales

Colin Boylan and Lex Bittar

Charles Sturt University
School of Education
Locked Bag 588 Wagga Wagga,
New South Wales 2678

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School Councils in New South Wales

Abstract

This study examines the respective roles of school councils in New South Wales, Australia. It explores the way school councils function in small schools as well as the perceptions of members about their roles and responsibilities. The findings have utility at the departmental level where policies regarding the creation and role of councils are formulated.

Introduction

In most nations, small schools are part of the country's educational milieu.

School councils are a recent phenomenon in the public education systems in the New South Wales education system. In New South Wales, the impetus for school councils began with the ***School Centred Education*** report (Scott, 1990). In this report, school councils were envisaged as: 'councils are seen as vital elements in building a strong infrastructure for schools' and 'the recommendation for school councils ... develop closer links between schools and their communities.' (pp. 76-79). The establishment of school councils began slowly and, in some schools, was met with some resistance. In 1995 the Department of School Education placed the formation of school councils on its priority agenda in response to this slow rate of establishment. This prioritising of school councils led to most schools forming a council. By contrast, over the period 1990 -1992 in the Riverina region of New South Wales, the then Assistant Director General - Region had supported strongly the creation of school councils through both financial incentives (a one off $1000 grant to the school council) and professional training programs for all council members. This emphasis meant that by 1994 over 90% of Riverina schools had school councils operating. However, by 1998, with numerous changes to the organisational structure of the Department and changes in key personnel, a number of school councils had dissolved or were in recess.

Some Literature

The creation of school councils or boards is a world wide phenomenon of the past decade. In countries such as England, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada and Australia, school councils have become important policy making organisations within schools. Feng (1997) observed that in many states of the Unites States of America, school councils have become part of the educational reform agenda for schools of the 1990's.

In the New South Wales education system, various policy documents about the roles, functions and responsibilities of school councils and their members have stressed the benefits for schools and staff when parental and community input into the provision of education occurs (NSW DSE, 1995; NSW DET, 1998).

The Ministry of Education and Training in Ontario has stated that the reasons for establishing school councils include: i) increasing parental involvement in the education of their child and hence the child's learning; ii) making the school system more accountable; and iii) providing advice to the school principal on a range of matters (MET Policy/program memo no 122, 1995).

The Western Australian Education Department as a result of the School Education Act 1999 has commenced a process of establishment of school councils in all Western Australian school. The Act requires every school to create a council by 2003. The WA school councils have particular roles in setting school objectives and overall direction, school policies, priorities and performance, student dress codes, charges and contributions. (Overman-Edmiston, 2001)

Fullan and Quinn (1996) suggested two possible scenarios for the functioning of school councils. In scenario A, the school council can be regarded as a political policy fad and their creation is seen as an end in itself. In this scenario, the school responds by implementing the legislative requirements regarding membership, modes of election, and meeting other organisational/administrative requirements. This scenario is labelled the 'compliance orientation' by Fullan and Quinn (1996: 2-3). In Scenario B, these authors suggested that school councils become the means for creating a stronger and deeper partnership between parents, teachers and the whole school community for the purpose of improving the quality of education provided to the students. This scenario, Fullan and Quinn label the 'capacity-building orientation' (1996: 4-5), and they contend can produce fundamental changes to the relationship between a school and its community which invoke the concepts associated with forming a learning community (Senge, 1990).

These orientations have provided a conceptual framework for the present study and the recency of school council introduction in New South Wales education system prompted a detailed analysis of their roles and functions.

The roles of school councils

Within the NSW educational system, the roles and responsibilities of the school councils were developed to serve the local needs. As the education department has a relatively recent history on the establishment of school councils, an analysis of the published departmental policy documents on the stated roles and responsibilities of school councils was conducted. From this analysis, the school council's role can be categorised into five areas of commonality:

1. Status. The school council has a clearly identified advisory role to the school Principal and /or other educational administrative groups.

2. Policy making. This is where the school councils develop aims, priorities and goals for the educational program developed and offered at the school.

3. Policy Advice. Here the school council has an advisory role into the selection process for the principal and the setting of priorities for the educational resource needs of the school.

4. Budget functions. The school council's role is to work with the school principal to develop school budgetary plans that reflect the educational priorities, the strategies designed to meet educational needs and to achieve the goals identified in the school budget.

5. Accountability. The school council provides the primary forum and mechanism through which the educational goals and programs of the school, the plans of the school council and the achievements of students are made public to the community.

In addition to these core educationally focussed roles, the education department has stipulated a number of organisational, administrative and procedural roles for school councils. These further aspects of the roles and responsibilities of school councils and its constituent members are identified.

1. Policy Making. Establish goals, priorities and procedures.

2. Development/Training. Organise information and training sessions to enable members of the council to develop their skills as council members.

3. Management Practices. Hold a minimum number of meetings per year; and all meetings shall be open to the members of school community.

4. Accountability. Communicate regularly with parents and other community members to seek their views and preferences with regard to matters being addressed by the council; and Promote the best interests of the school community

5. Representation. The minimum required proportion of parents elected annually as members.

The design of the study

The purpose of this study was to focus on the operation of school councils in small schools and to seek school council members perceptions and views on the functioning of school councils and their roles as members of a school council. A purposive sample of small schools were selected. For our study a small school was defined as a school with a total student enrolment of less than 200.

Twenty- eight schools were contacted and eighteen responded producing a total of 96 respondents. All schools were selected from the Riverina region. The schools included rural central (K-12) schools and rural primary schools that were classified as P4, P5 or P6 primary schools.

Although the number of responses was small, the content of the responses was remarkably consistent.

Findings

Membership

Who were the members of the school councils?

School principals, teachers, parents, and community members were always represented on school councils. Also in a few instances support staff and students were members. In Table 1 below the median number of people representing particular constituencies are reported.

Table 1
School council membership

Type of Constituent	New South Wales
Parent	4
Teacher	3
Community Member	1
Principal	1

The majority of the school councils were formed in 1992. Usually a school council met 8 times per year with a standard deviation of 1.8 meetings as per the mandated requirements.

Role perceptions

All participants were asked to respond to a series of 18 likert style items in two areas dealing with: i) the degree of involvement in achieving its defined functions (4 items); and ii) providing advice on a range of education related matters (14 items). The three point likert scale used for all items was 'a great degree', 'some degree' and 'not at all'. All items were drawn from the official policy documents of both education departments and the wording of each item was kept as close to the official wording as possible.

1. Functions

Overall school council members reported similar levels of involvement in the following functions:

i) establishing its priorities and goals.
ii) seeking the views of community members and parents about school matters.
iii) reporting on school council activities to the school community.
iv) promoting the best interests of the school within the community.

Establishing its priorities and goals, and promoting the best interests of the school within the community were identified as activities that the majority of members were regarded as areas in which the school council spent a great deal of time. Seeking the views of community members and parents about school matters, and reporting on school council activities to the school community were activities to which both system's councils gave 'some degree' of attention and time. Less than 10% of all respondents selected the 'not at all' option for these four statements about their school council's functioning.

2. Advisory roles

In this section of the study, participants were presented with items relating to three areas pertaining to the advisory roles of school councils. These were:

i) school organisation issues. These were: the school calender, school budget priorities, selection criteria for the school principal, school district plans, and school improvement plans;
ii) educational issues. These covered: the code of student conduct and behaviour, curriculum offered, reporting to the school's community, the range of school based services provided, monitoring educational authority policies, and preparing a school profile; and
iii) partnership issues. These were: community use of the school's facilities, provision of extracurricular activities, and community partnerships in social, health or recreational programs.

In the following tables, all results are reported as whole percentages.

Table 2
Advice on school organisational issues

	A great degree %	Some degree %	Not at all %	Omit %
Advice on school-year calendar	9.4	40.6	42.7	7.3
Setting school budget priorities	51.0	31.2	10.4	6.2
Selection for school principal	18.7	31.2	39.6	10.4
Responding to school district plans/programs	15.6	61.5	15.6	7.3
Planning for school improvement activities	43.7	48.9	2.1	5.2

The trends in the responses suggest that school council members have some degree of input and providing advice on responding to school district plans/programs, and planning for school improvement activities. In New South Wales, council members reported that they have a high level of input/advice on setting school budget priorities and the selection for school principal.

Table 3
Advice on educational issues

	A great degree %	Some degree %	Not at all %	Omit %
The code of student conduct and behaviour	59.4	33.3	2.1	5.2
The curriculum offered at the school	13.5	53.1	27.1	6.2
How the school reports to its community	25.0	62.5	9.4	5.2
Examining the range of school based services provided to students	14.6	56.2	21.9	7.3
Monitoring educational authority policies within the school	28.1	47.9	17.7	6.2
Preparing a school profile	45.8	41.7	5.2	7.3

The response patterns from school councils show their perceptions of their advisory roles on educational issues is considered to be important and valued. In most situations the members believe they have some input into these matters.

In the following table, Table 4, school council members responses to partnership activities is reported.

Table 4
Advice on partnership issues

	A great degree %	Some degree %	Not at all %	Omit %
Community use of the school's facilities.	20.8	54.2	18.8	6.2
Provision of extracurricular activities in the school.	13.5	45.8	34.4	6.2
Seeking community partnerships in social, health or recreational programs.	11.5	51.0	31.3	6.2

Generally, the response patterns from the school councils on partnership issues indicated that they provide some advice to the school on each of these three items.

Following the series of likert scale items in the survey, a set of six open ended questions seeking written responses from the schools councils members were included. These six questions have been grouped into three areas focussing on identifying the school council members' perceptions of:

i) areas in which the council functions well and how the school council has benefited the school;
ii) where the school councils should focus their efforts and whether school councils should have greater responsibility for things that happen within the school; and
iii) identifying the weaknesses and challenges of facing school councils.

Where the councils do a good job and how they benefit the schools?

The school council members indicated that the presence of the councils had increased the amount of communication between the parents and the schools and this provides parent with an opportunity to become more involved in the schools. Some school council members commented that their councils have assisted the Principal in working through issues by acting as the "sounding board" before an issue becomes a school guideline or policy. As one member said: *"Attendance at meetings to give support to the principal in the financial and administration sector."* The areas where the school councils appeared to view their contributions as most beneficial included: discussing problems with their communities, community awareness of school activities, student welfare and discipline policy, setting school budget priorities, and in providing opportunities for pupils.

According to some New South Wales school council members, one of the benefits of the current infrastructure of the school councils has been the separation of the representation function from the issue of fund-raising responsibilities which were often maintained by the Parents & Citizens association at their schools. The consequence of this separation of functions was perceived by a number of school council members to create two significant advantages: i). more parents and community were involved in school matters; and ii) the opportunity to raise the profile of the school within the local community was promoted, eg. *"lifted the school profile in the community."*

One of the benefits of having a school council was described in terms of the involvement that parents play in the operation of the schools. This involvement may range from the purchase of playground equipment to giving input related to the "hard issues" that Principals must often deal with in the school. As one NSW respondent noted *"more eyes and ears in the management and smooth running of the school."* In addition, most respondents indicated that it is gratifying when successful school programs are effectively communicated to the communities and the communities respond favourably to the work of the school councils.

Where the school councils should focus their efforts and suggestion as to whether the school councils should have greater responsibility for things that happen within the school

A number of suggestions for where the school councils should focus their efforts and whether the school councils should have greater responsibility for things that happen within the schools were provided by the respondents. The majority of council members viewed improving communication with their school communities and promoting the

positive aspects of their schools as essential to where the councils should focus their energies. As one NSW council member wrote *"promote the school to attract more pupils and promote policies that enable pupils to reach their full potential."*

Increasing the responsibility and say of council members for things that happen in the schools was greeted with a fairly even split between those on either side of the argument. Those in support of increasing the role of the school council indicated that parents are key players when it comes to educating their children and that council members represent the communities. According to a few respondents, the parents and the students have a better knowledge of what is good for their schools because they are so directly involved in the educational system. Some council members suggested that the council members should have some responsibility in the staff selection an d staff retention areas of school human resource management, eg. *"more power in staff selection"*.

Other council members remarked that parents do not want too direct a role in the day-to-day operations of the schools because parents lack the knowledge base to get involved in many decisions made in school. The suggestion was made by a NSW council member *"I think the school should be run by the Principal and staff. I think the school council is there for support and discussion. The Principal is there because he wants to be running the school and we, as a council, should support him*

A few respondents did note that some viewed the school councils as there to serve the needs of the school Principal and this, therefore, affected the autonomy of the school councils. As one NSW member stated *"a perception of some people who have served on the school council (and some serving) is that they are just a rubber stamp for whatever the Principal and executive staff of the school want."* Others suggested that the school councils are not a rubber stamp for the Principal and that these councils can be integral to developing a positive image of schools in their respective communities.

The weaknesses and challenges of school councils

With respect to the weaknesses and the challenges facing school councils, there appeared to be areas of commonality between the respondents. Many indicated that the scope of reference for school councils is sometimes vague and that the councils often lack direction and support from the Department of Education and Training, eg. *"sidelining of school council by department."* In addition, some members noted that the councils need to educate the parents and the public in terms of the good work that the councils do for the schools and the communities.

A number of members viewed the involvement of persons on the council who were there only to promote their own agendas as being very detrimental to both the operation of the school councils and the communities. The rapid changes to the educational sector were criticised by school councils members because they felt they have not been fully informed of these changes, nor are they well prepared to deal with the backlash from parents with respect to these ongoing changes.

Some members focussed on challenges in improving the quality of school life for the students. Some of the specific issues identified included: dangers around the school bus stop; providing shelter for children outside; and loss of support services provided by the Health Department.

Finally a number of school council members saw one of the main challenges as being able to increase parent interest, participation and support for the School Council. This was manifest through comments such as: *" community members are becoming hard to appoint"; the challenge is to find new vitality to keep the kettle boiling"; "lack of parent support"*; and *getting people to fill positions on the school council"*.

Greater responsibility for school councils?

One question sought council member's opinions on whether the school council should have greater responsibility and say for things that happen within the school. About three in eight council members (37.9%) supported the notion of increasing the School Council's areas of responsibility. However, over half of the respondents (56.9%) disagreed with this view. When asked to explain their opinion, the school council members cited the same range of benefits, focus, weaknesses, problems and challenges as reported to the preceding analyses of responses to the open ended questions.

Training and development needs

One question on the survey specifically sought the views of school council members on their training and development needs. This question was worded: *"In order to meet your training and development needs, could you please rank your top 3 priority areas (1=most important) from those listed below"*. The school council members were asked to select their top three priority training and development needs from the list of eight needs provided. In Table 5 the rankings of each need are shown as percentages.

Table 5
Training and development needs

Training and development need	FIRST Ranking (%)	SECOND Ranking (%)	THIRD Ranking (%)	Not Selected (%)
Goal setting	12.1	12.1	10.3	65.5
Identify/analyse the needs of the school community	43.1	24.1	12.1	20.7
Strategic planning	13.8	13.8	12.1	60.3
Meeting procedures	5.2	1.7	6.9	86.2
Financial management	5.2	17.2	13.8	63.8
Effective communication	10.3	5.2	12.1	72.4
Monitoring and evaluating school plans	8.6	15.5	20.7	55.2
Responding to Departmental priorities	0	6.9	5.2	87.9

This table identified that highest ranked training and development need focussed on members of the school council strengthening their ability to identify and analyse the needs of the school community.

Conclusion

The aim of the school councils in New South Wales is *"to ensure that the whole community is involved with all the important decisions made by the school"* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998). The NSW councils appear to have sufficient numbers to support its activities.

Council members indicated their displeasure over the possibility of councils being taken over by special interest groups who do not represent the community. Councils expressed an interest in being involved in developing policies related to a number of areas within the schools but respondents were less certain about whether they should be involved in curriculum development. Most councils saw their roles as including interactions amongst the community, involvement in the administration of the school, and the distribution of decision-making power amongst. Council members criticised the cutbacks in funding to education.

While it is true that school councils have the potential to be key players in the New South Wales educational communities, there are still a number of challenges that must be overcome with respect to defining more clearly the roles and responsibilities of these councils (Wignall, 1996). When a comparison with the responses from the schools councils to the two scenarios proposed by Fullan and Quinn (1996) is conducted, it is evident that the 'compliance orientation' has been met by all schools and, in many schools, this orientation seems to be their *modus operandi*. However, there are some promising signs expressed by individual members of school councils. They envisage their school councils can or will evolve into facilitators creating stronger and deeper partnerships between parents, teachers and their school community. Here, the 'capacity-building orientation' labelled by Fullan and Quinn (1996) has its origins and is evident as council members focus on i) improving the quality of education provided to the students, and ii) producing significant changes to the relationship between a school and its community as they work towards building a learning community (Senge, 1990).

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